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Key Vocabulary

betwixt: between
chanced: happened
clammy: sweaty and cold
parched: thirsty
delirium's strife: struggle with a high fever
quail: pull back fearfully
unsanctioned: not allowed
oft times: often
the lines: battle lines where soldiers fought the Civil War
implored: begged
consolers: people who comfort others

The Women Who Went to the Field

The women who went to the field, you say, . . .
 What did they go for? Just to be in the way!—
 They'd not know the difference **betwixt** work and play,
 What did they know about war anyway?
 5 What could they do? of what use could they be?
 They would scream at the sight of a gun, don't you see? . . .
 And thus it was settled by common consent, . . .
 [By] husbands, or brothers, or whoever went,
 That the place for the women was in their own homes,
 10 There to patiently wait until victory comes.
 But later, it **chanced**, just how no one knew,
 That the lines slipped a bit, and some [be]gan to crowd through;
 And they went, where did they go? Ah; where did they not?
 Show us the battle, the field, or the spot
 15 Where the groans of the wounded rang out on the air
 That her ear caught it not, and her hand was not there,
 Who wiped the death sweat from the cold **clammy** brow,
 And sent home the message;—"Tis well with him Now?"
 Who watched in the tents, whilst the fever fires burned,
 20 And the pain-tossing limbs in agony turned,
 And wet the **parched** tongue, calmed **delirium's strife**
 Till the dying lips murmured, "My Mother," "My Wife"!
 Did these women **quail** at the sight of a gun?
 Will some soldier tell us of one he saw run?
 25 [T]hese were the women who went to the war:
 The women of question; what did they go for? . . .
 They saw, in high purpose, a duty to do,
 And the armor of right broke the barriers through.
 Uninvited, unaided, **unsanctioned oft times**,
 30 With pass, or without it, they pressed on **the lines**;
 They pressed, they **implored**, till they ran the lines through,
 And this was the "running" the men saw them do. . . .
 And what would they do if war came again? . . .
 They would stand with you now, as they stood with you then,
 35 The nurses, **consolers**, and saviors of men.

—Clara Barton

Springboard
 According to the poem, what were women supposed to do in wartime? How does Clara Barton describe the contribution of women who went to war? How does she explain why women like herself left home to be on the front line during the Civil War?

Find Out More

about Clara Barton in
Clara Barton: Founder of the Red Cross by Augusta Stevenson, Aladdin, 1986,
 or in other sources.